FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
MARCH 3, 2002

INCLUDED
John M. Buchanan

Few people match the inclusiveness of Jesus' welcome...Jesus was different. In the communities he created, from his ragtag band of followers to the varied groups with whom he sat down to dinner, he would welcome anybody, and the stories imply that no one ever went away hungry when they came to eat with Jesus. The excluded were those who excluded themselves...What would it look like to participate, in whatever small ways, the reign of God? Love God. Love your neighbors. Seek equality and justice. Welcome everyone to join in.

William C. Placher
Jesus the Savior, The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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INCLUDED
March 3, 2002

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Exodus 17:1-7
John 4:5-42

"Sir, give this water, so that I may never be thirsty."
John 4:15 (NRSV)

You have invited us to be in your presence, O God, and promised that when we are together, you are in our midst. And so we come, hungry for a good word, thirsty for the living water of your love. Now startle us, once again, with your truth in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I was reminded this week of one of the most harrowing evenings of my life. I heard from a fraternity brother, one of my oldest and best friends, and Joe's letter reminded me of that evening long ago. It was the night the fraternities on campus made their choices on who would receive invitations to become pledges and then members.

The system worked like this: Every weekend during the fall, the fraternities invited groups of freshmen to their houses for rush parties—"smokers" they were called. It was carefully planned and choreographed. Attractive freshmen were surrounded by attractive upperclassmen, members of the fraternity: athletes, scholars, depending on the freshman's interest, who would tell the potential pledge all the wonderful characteristics of the particular fraternity, flatter him, tell him how wonderful he was and what a firm addition to the house he would make. We unattractive freshmen were pretty much ignored and left to fend for ourselves and finally to disappear into the darkness. The ritual occurred each weekend during the fall, and then the day arrived for decisions to be made. As I recall, all the freshmen assembled in the auditorium and each indicated his first three preferences of fraternities on a ballot or bid and then placed the bids in a box and sat down to wait. The bids were sorted and carried to the respective houses, where the members were waiting to choose which freshmen to accept as pledges and which to reject. After several hours, the results were announced to the anxiously awaiting freshmen. It was harrowing. For my friends, this moment loomed as one of the greatest or worst moments in life. When they were selected by their choice, it was a moment of affirmation and satisfaction and inclusion. This fraternity wants me! I have been included! For others, the ones who were not chosen, it was the opposite: a deflating, sometimes shattering experience—I have been rejected. Excluded.

We survive these experiences mostly. But sometimes they leave lifelong scars. And always they point to something deep inside us: some deep need, some powerful thirst as palpable as real thirst at midday in a dry, parched desert.

One time Jesus taught his friends about it. They were traveling from Judea in the south back home to Galilee in the north. It was a long journey. "He had to go through Samaria," John the Gospel writer says. But if you look at a Bible map, you'll notice that the most direct route from Judea to Galilee doesn't go through Samaria at all. It's out of the way. If you have to go to Samaria, it's because you have business there, something you want to do, someone you want to see. So they take a side road and after walking for hours, unnecessary hours, I'm sure some of them are complaining. They arrive at a well. Jacob's well, in fact. It's midday. It's hot. They're hungry and thirsty. Jesus is tired. So his friends go to the closest town to buy some food. As he sits by the well in the heat of midday, a woman approaches. And now we have a very interesting situation. It would make a first-century Jewish reader highly uncomfortable.

In the first place, she is a Samaritan, and for something like 700 years there had been a festering and deep and hostile division between the Jews of Judea and Galilee and their second cousins, the Samaritans. It has to do with which temple was the real one and whose laws were the real thing, who was pure and who was impure. Jews and Samaritans had nothing to with each other, had pretty much excommunicated each other from the one true faith and for centuries had cultivated a deep and profound racial and religious hatred. Normally Jews on the way from Judea to Galilee would have gone out of their way to avoid Samaria, not intentionally traveled there. So here he is, a young Jewish rabbi, sitting at a well in Samaria, and he sees a Samaritan coming toward him. It's time for him to get up and move a hundred feet away, say, to avoid a confrontation that is going to be uncomfortable, unacceptable, and, in fact, illegal. It will render Jesus impure.

Furthermore, it's not any old Samaritan. It's a woman. And the law is clear that males, particularly rabbis, are not to have anything to do with women, other than their wives, in public.

It's time for Jesus to get out of there. And instead he does the most astonishing thing, shocking actually: he asks her for a drink of water. She objects. "You know better than that. You're not supposed to have anything to do with me," she says.

He says, "If you knew who I was you would give me a drink and I would give you 'living water.'"

And then the conversation takes an odd turn. We're about to find out something about her that makes it all the more urgent that Jesus get out of there as quickly as possible. "Go bring your husband," he says. "I have no husband," she responds. "You're right," Jesus observes. "You had five husbands and you're living with a man who is not your husband." And now the encounter is way out of bounds. She's a Samaritan and a woman and a sinner. That's probably why she is coming to the well in the heat of day instead of the cooler evening hours when women ordinarily visit the well. She's an outcast among her own people.

Their conversation continues. She more than holds her own. She is not intimidated by him. And he isn't afraid of her. Something very new is going on here. Most important of all, he has not rejected her. She is guilty of flagrant immorality and everybody knows it. She has become accustomed to the enormous stigma with which her personal and sexual behavior marks her. She has come to terms with universal rejection. Here, perhaps for the first time in her life, is a man who doesn't react to her as men always do: as a potential sexual partner or as a social outcast

unfit to be seen with. This man has neither tried to seduce her nor condemned her. He has talked to her. Accepted her. It was the most stunning and unexpected experience of her life, so stunning that she drops her water jar and starts to run back to the village to tell her neighbors—the ones who will listen to her, that is—about this amazing man.

Just at that moment, his disciples arrive with lunch and they're horrified. "What are you doing?" they ask. "Why were you speaking with her?" It was for them, I think, one of the turning points, one of the great lessons they learned from him. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son," John wrote later. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." If there ever was a moment for legitimate, justifiable condemnation, this was it. She was guilty, a sinner. The law allowed three husbands. She had five and after that simply stopped trying to appear respectable. At the very least, he should have pointed out her precarious moral status. He didn't do it, and twenty centuries later many of his friends don't get the point. He came not to condemn but to save; not to exclude but to include; not to judge but to redeem.

The final detail is amazing. The woman becomes the first evangelist. She couldn't be ordained in the Presbyterian church, because she hasn't repented of something the Book of Confessions calls sin. Not to pick on the Presbyterian church, she couldn't be ordained in the Lutheran or Methodist church, and the Roman Catholics wouldn't touch her with a 10-foot pole. Frankly, she doesn't much care: she gave up on organized religion long ago. All she does is bear eloquent witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in a way his own disciples have not even approached. She runs to the village, tells everybody who will listen about this amazing man who knew all about her and didn't reject and condemn and exclude. And she asks in the midst of the tears running down her face, "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" — a question, not a proclamation; a suggestion, not a declaration of theological certainty.

And the most amazing thing of all: "many Samaritans believed"—and not only believed, but the people of that village, those radical outcast and religious heretics, invited that little band of 12 politically correct, morally pure, and theologically orthodox Jews to do the unthinkable: to stay with them. And they accepted.

Nothing like that had ever happened before. Ancient enemies, people who believed in the very depths of their hearts that the others were so wrong, so outside orthodox definitions of morality, that contact with them was repugnant, unthinkable—those people spent two days together. They must have eaten together. They must have shared dishes and utensils and cups even. They had never done anything like that in their lives. They must have slept under the same roofs. I'll bet they had a party. I'll bet they had a banquet and drank a little wine—men and women, Jews and Samaritans. And I'll bet before Jesus and his friends left to resume their journey to Galilee, they embraced. And that is why John says, "He had to go through Samaria."

Something utterly new was happening in this strange man. Something that transcended all the old certainties and all the old boundaries that, for centuries, had defined the righteous, religious life and in the process provided appropriate boundaries for including and excluding people.

There is at the moment a deep conflict in the mainline churches about what sexual behavior is outside the bounds of Christian morality and what theological standards are absolutely necessary to call oneself a Christian. It is about inclusion and exclusion. And within these churches, including our own, there is a determined effort by some to build the boundary walls high when it comes to ordination and theologically to insist that our truth about Jesus Christ is the only truth and that it must be articulated in a certain way in order to be acceptable. And while it is not violent, the conservative movement does, in fact, talk openly about holding errant churches and leaders accountable and doing whatever is necessary to keep the church securely inside those high boundaries.

While we fight these battles, the church across the land continues to lose members; not, I propose because it is too liberal, as is often suggested by conservatives, and not because it is too conservative, but because people find our internal conflicts boring. Our first evangelist, after all, was that woman, that wonderfully strong, theologically heretical, morally culpable, irrepressible woman who ran to tell her friends about a man who did not condemn her but accepted her.

In the meantime, our petty conflicts over who is in and who is out are played out against a historical backdrop of unspeakable religious hatred and violence that erupted this week between Hindus and Muslims in India, while continuing unabated in Israel and Palestine. In a Sunday *New York Times* essay on the murder of *Wall Street Journal* reporter David Pearl and why journalists can no longer count on safety, John Kifner wrote, "In many places where we now operate, the idea of an impartial, independent press, is an alien concept. Post-cold-war battlefields in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Asia are stoked by religious certitude, that most toxic of ideologies" ("Correspondence: Dangerous Stories," 24 February 2002).

"Religious certitude, that most toxic of ideologies."

Near the beginning of the story of Jesus is an incident that presents a radically different way of thinking and being, a way that will take its risks on the side of inclusion, acceptance, not rejection; love, not contempt, to use the words of the Gospel writer.

A Samaritan woman, a religious, racial, and moral outcast, gave Jesus a drink of water to quench his thirst. And Jesus gave her "living water"—his acceptance, his inclusion, his love, which he meant for her to know as God's acceptance, God's inclusion, God's love.

The thirst for that is deep within each one of us—no matter who we are.

Ron Allen, a popular religious teacher and writer, remembers what it feels like. "Born with a large birthmark on his face, Allen learned to live with stares from adults and other children. Sometimes he almost forgot about how he looked—but not always."

He remembers

> When I was about eight, I was with some neighborhood kids. We were building a dam across a drainage ditch down the block. A new kid came up, looked me full in the face, and cried out, "That's the ugliest thing I've ever seen!"
>
> I was crushed. I climbed out of the ditch and ran home into the kitchen, where my mother wrapped my sobbing body in her apron. She was there for me. She mediated God's presence. (Lundblad, page 32).

One time, long ago, a woman accustomed to being excluded said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so I may never be thirsty."

And that is what he did. He accepted her. He did not condemn her. He loved her. He invited her into his amazing kingdom of grace and welcome and inclusion.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Prayers of the People
By Carol J. Allen, Associate Pastor for Congregational Care

Holy Lord God, we have come in out of a bone-chilling morning seeking warmth—the warmth of companionship, comfort in our suffering, light from your Word, rekindling of faith, and the renewal of courage to cope with daily demands. Gracious God, remember us who are gathered here with this household of your people. Look kindly upon us and grant us your hope, your healing, and your peace.

We thank you for the gift of our lives and the measure of health that is in us. In all ages you have offered "surprising and gracious provision for your people." Even as we grumble and doubt, like our ancestors in the faith, "your love is flowing among us with continuous mercy."

Creating and renewing God, "we need your love like water from the rock, quenching thirst and refreshing those who are weary. We pray for your love to spring up and flow" into all places of need in our world. "To come near to you is to change," so bring us close to you [inspired by David Steere]. We pray that we might loosen our grip on personal hates and fears, stubborn ambitions, and lovelessness that holds back the maturing of the human community [Dianne Karay]. We pray for the sweetness of your peace to flow between those who are locked in animosities and violence fueled by ancient hatreds and stereotypes based in race, class, ethnic, and national identities. We pray for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, between Hindus and Muslims, between Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Stay the hands that destroy life. Empower the hands of all who work to end killing and who seek to distribute the abundance of your creation that all might flourish and breathe easy in the night.

Rule the hearts of all who govern us in our nation and in all nations, that they may do justice, love mercy, and walk in the ways of truth. Bless and defend all who strive for our safety and protection, and shield them from danger and adversities. Grant us to find and put into practice ways that insure dignity, food, and shelter for all. Defend and provide for the widowed and the orphaned, the refugees and the homeless, the unemployed, and all who are desolate and oppressed. Strengthen and preserve children; comfort the aged, the bereaved, and the lonely. Heal those who are sick in body or mind, and give skill, resiliency, and compassion to all who care for them.

Judging and redeeming God, keep our feet firmly in the way where Christ leads us, make our mouths speak the truth that Christ teaches us, fill our bodies with the life that is Christ in us, and show the love of Christ through us [adapted from *The Book of Common Worship,* PCUSA]. We are bold to pray in the words Jesus taught his followers to say: Our Father . . .